

Chapter 11

Worshipping Community

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SABBATH

Where are we today?

There are many wrinkles to the story of worship in the Christian Church today. One of the most disconcerting is that worship attendance is in continuous decline. Even though there are segments of Christianity that are growing in membership and attendance, the overall picture of worship attendance gives reason for concern. Contrary to our perceptions and estimations, it appears that worship attendance is less than we have always thought.¹

These national and cultural worship attendance trends are manifested locally as well. Granted, there is good news and bad news about our present situation. The good news is that corporate worship is the best attended activity in most churches. Many of us realize the importance and centrality of a congregation gathered for worship. It seems safe to say that no other formal or informal function or activity in many churches is as well attended.

¹See, for example, Michael Lipka, *What surveys say about worship attendance – and why some stay home*, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/13/what-surveys-say-about-worship-attendance-and-why-some-stay-home/>. Accessed November 13, 2017.

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²This text and all other quotations in this chapter are taken from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible, unless otherwise stated.

The bad news is that it is still a small percentage of membership that regularly attends worship services, and even more disconcerting news is that this percentage is presently on a declining trajectory. It seems easy to grow a bit tired and bored with weekly witnessing and rejoicing together. Acknowledging the church community as a miracle of God's grace is beginning to grow old. Worship attendance and participation in church activities fall very short of God's vision for His community presented in Scripture: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord"² (Psalm 150:6). Discomforting reality is that many upon whom we rely to sing faith into our lives, to hold our hands and our lives in prayer, to support us, and to challenge us, are not with us. We sorely miss them, because we know them and we love them. But we also deeply miss them in the most objective sense—our community is weaker for their absence.

We cannot afford to look the other way and pretend that we do not have challenges. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will highlight the biblical vision and significance of corporate worship for the community of faith and the ways worship defines and forms the community. Our hope is that the Sligo community of faith would experience a fresh conviction of the centrality of worship in the community of faith and act on the imperative of worship attendance and participation.

What is the worship attendance that you perceive at Sligo church on a weekly basis? Are you attending each week? In your estimation, is your

worship attendance pattern part of the problem or part of the solution?

SUNDAY

The Imperative of Worship for the Community of Faith

Worship is the highest calling of every Christian and the preeminent task of every church. It is the only eternal activity of both the believer and the church. We Christians often think that mission is the central purpose of the church, but mission and evangelism have a higher rationale. We take the gospel to our neighborhoods and to the far corners of the earth to call all people to their God because, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised" (Psalm 145:3). God desires to be worshipped (Psalm 96:9) and that is why we announce His glory and His deeds among the nations of the world (Psalm 96:3-4). One day the work of evangelism will end because in the eternal kingdom of God all will know Him and there will be no need to convince anyone about Him (Jeremiah 31:34). Therefore, in the present age we can neglect neither evangelism nor worship.

Communities of faith have been gathering together for millennia to worship God in response to His revelation in creation and salvation. We can never have enough of the beauty revealed to us in the created order. The grace of the Tuscan hills, azure waters of the Caribbean, majesty of the Grand Canyon, splendor of the redwoods, smell of the summer rain, elegance of flamingoes, the purity of a new-born child, all awaken songs and praises to

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God from whom all these miracles come (Revelation 4:11; Psalm 95:1-5; 104:24-25). But even more so, we gather together to remember and celebrate God, who saved us. We can never get over our salvation. We are ever-stunned how God saved our family of faith from the house of slavery in Egypt in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:2). And we are ever-enthralled and ever-riveted by the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Son of God on our behalf. Our love, our songs, and our praises are delighted captives to His beauty and glory forever (Revelation 5:11-13).

Worship is a profoundly countercultural activity of the community of faith. The community gathers together to praise the Other, God, in a culture that prizes self-sufficiency and self-obsession. That is why refusing or neglecting to gather together and participate in worship is rejecting God's unique way to wean us away from our self-absorption.

Do you live up to the imperative of worship as an individual and as a member of the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church? Do you long with all of your being to worship God for His creation and salvation?

MONDAY

Individual or Corporate?

Love and enjoyment of nature is a significant part of the Adventist ethos and lore: we enjoy Sabbath walks in the nature; we love to listen to and learn about God's miracles of creation; we advocate nature-friendly health principles; and we invest significant resources as a denomination in studying the natural world and relating it to the biblical revelation of God as Creator. It is not a stretch to assume that we may

want to substitute a stroll in the park, camping in the mountains, or spending a weekend by the sea for congregational worship. We may think that it is sufficient to pay our homage to the Sabbath if we worship alone, without unnecessary noise and without mingling with "unpleasant" people.

However, the biblical revelation testifies that our eternal and preeminent duty of worship is primarily corporate activity. Even though the Bible intimates that worship involves all of life (Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 10:31), and that we should worship God personally (Psalm 42:1-2; John 4:23-24), its main emphasis is on worship as something that the entire community does when it gathers together. God expects each one of us to participate in corporate worship (Psalm 113:1; 149:1; Hebrews 10:25). It is not an option for a Christian; it is a requirement for every believer. Thus, when we are not in corporate worship, we are not fulfilling the purpose of our existence and we are depriving God of the praises we ought to give Him in the congregation of His people.

As we think of the church and our worship attendance, some of us may have strong convictions like, *I am not getting much from Sabbath morning worship! or, On Saturday morning I would rather be anywhere else but in church! or, Nobody in the church seems to care much about me!* Our experiences and our convictions certainly matter, but our ultimate standard and motivation has to be, *What does God desire?* And God desires that all the earth would worship Him (Psalm 66:4; 86:9; 117:1), so to all of us He says, *Come!* (Psalm 95:1-2, 6; 100:1-2). And in our attempt to be faithful to what God desires, the

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example of our Lord Jesus Christ should compel and encourage us (Luke 4:16).

Is it sometimes easier to skip Sabbath morning service and spend that time in nature or in some other way? If so, how could you regain a desire for corporate worship? What convinces you that on Sabbath morning you should be in church?

TUESDAY

Preaching and Community

Preaching is a central element of our worship service and it builds community in diverse ways. One of the most prominent ways is by teaching to us and reminding us of our foundational story. Since Sligo Church is a very diverse community with different ethnic backgrounds, languages, passions, interests, and concerns, that we are together in one loving and caring fellowship and that we feel deep invisible, yet real, connections with one another, is a miracle of God (1 Peter 2:10). What holds us together in the same community is, fundamentally, the story of the gospel, proclaimed and taught to us in our Sabbath sermons. The sermons present to us the narrative of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ that gives us identity as community and creates the passion, care, and concern that we have for one another.

Our sermons build and strengthen our community by teaching us how to be a community. The Word of God has supernatural and incomparable power to pierce and dispense with our moral pretenses and

self-delusions (Hebrews 4:12). Therefore, when the Word of God is proclaimed, it exposes the follies of our practical conduct and confronts our moral failures: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). Our pastors work diligently to instruct us about what it means to be the true biblical community and how should we act as members of this community. We should listen to their sermons with eagerness and anticipation that we will learn how to genuinely love each other and how to demonstrate this love in practical ways (see Romans 12:9-21).

The Holy Spirit works through the preaching of the Word of God to make the community alive. Jesus said, “It is the Spirit who gives life; . . . The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). The Spirit of God is the life-giving power (Ezekiel 36:27; 37:9-10). When the Word of God is proclaimed in our sermons, the Spirit of God unites with the Word to accomplish the work of the Word in our hearts and lives (1 Thessalonians 1:5; 1 Corinthians 2:4; Galatians 3:2). The Holy Spirit uses the mode of the proclaimed Word to transform our lives and enable us to live the Word of God as community.

Reflect on last week’s sermon. How did it help you understand who we are as a community of faith and how we should act as a community? How did the Holy Spirit speak to you in the last sermon? Prepare to listen the next sermon with the same anticipation.

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WEDNESDAY

Singing and Community

There is something wondrous and wonderful when a community of faith sings to God (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). For one, as we sing and make music, we forge community across history, across geographical regions, and across ethnic and social boundaries. We sing songs like *The Lord's My Shepherd* with lyrics that reach back all the way to David; and *Be Thou My Vision* that is dated to the eighth century; and *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* from the sixteenth century. These hymns unite us with the heroes of Christian tradition who are long gone but whose faith still lives in us and through us. They are ours and we are theirs. We sing songs like the Polish carol *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly*; and the African American spiritual *Give Me Jesus*; and the song of dying Henry Francis Lyte *Abide With Me*; and the Appalachian song *What Wondrous Love is This*. Singing these songs, we embody the breath of the Christian experience across the world, and we become part of a community that embraces the oppressed, dying, lonely, and disconsolate.

As we sing the songs and hymns of diverse Christian traditions, we join a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1) across time and across the world. Our local community of faith joins the voices which reverberate through the epochs of the past history. But our singing does not make us only a historical community; it defines us as the eschatological community. We sing in anticipation and with the foretaste of the day when

a great multitude will sing a new song to the Lamb (Revelation 14:1-3).

Meanwhile, our singing creates a sense of unity in our local church (Colossians 3:15-16). As beautiful as the songs and music of trained musicians among us are, there is an even more lovely sound in our church: "The most beautiful instrument in any Christian service is the sound of the congregation singing."³ Congregational singing has to have a most prominent place in worship services. As we sing each other's favorite hymns and songs we learn to understand each other and respect and value diverse experiences and emotional states represented among us each Sabbath morning. We give voice to a broad spectrum of deep and often-suppressed sensations in our hearts and we learn to better carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2).

Do you sing in worship services, or do you remain silent? How can you maintain joy in belonging to the diverse community of God through singing? Make a commitment to always sing in worship services.

THURSDAY

Prayer and Community

In obedience to the biblical mandate to pray for one another (James 5:16; 2 Corinthians 1:11), Sligo Church has a wonderful habit of mentioning its afflicted members by name in its pastoral prayers. We call these prayers pastoral not because pastors lead them, but because that is how we pastor one another; we shepherd each other and care for each

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³Jonathan Leeman, *Reverberation: How God's word brings light, freedom, and action to His people* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011), 159.

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other in a unique ways by these prayers. The church kneeling in prayer is a moving weekly practice that reaches beyond generalities and clichés and brings to our minds the faces and voices and hearts of specific human beings in our community. They love us enough to trust us with their needs and burdens and they make their needs and burdens public. We lovingly receive their needs and burdens and make them our own. This practice creates a sense of compassion, love, and unity.

Our corporate prayers are not the mere words and thoughts of a person leading us in prayer. *First*, our participation in corporate prayers on Sabbath morning cannot be reduced to mere overhearing someone else's prayer on our behalf. When we say *amen* at the end of our prayers, we confirm that we have not just listened in, but labored ourselves in prayer on behalf of our various needs, and we confirm that this prayer is our prayer too. *Second*, our corporate prayers are commitments to actions that build the community in tangible ways and reach far beyond the limitations of time and space in our Sabbath morning worship service. When we pray for one another, we are committing ourselves to allow God to use us to bring our prayers to fruition:

If we pray in the corporate body for someone who is ill, for example, then as members all of us look for ways to "put legs on our prayers" by sending cards or taking flowers, preparing meals or doing housework, caring for children or in some other way easing the strain, helping to defray medical expenses or offering rides to the doctor.⁴

When we pray on Sabbath mornings, we unite ourselves to the global community of God's people. As we intercede for the messengers of the gospel in far corners of the world, for pastors and leaders of the Adventist Church locally and worldwide, for persecuted brothers and sisters, we see ourselves no longer as merely the community on the corner of Flower Avenue and Carroll Avenue, but as members of the Global Body of Christ.

How can we as a community make prayer even more prominent in our worship services? What role can you play in this effort? Commit to participate actively and attentively in our corporate prayers on Sabbath mornings and other occasions.

FRIDAY

Commitment to Corporate Worship

What can each one of us do to ensure that the worship of Sligo Church is honoring God and pleasing to God? We can start by taking time to understand and appreciate God's perspective on our corporate worship. As we have mentioned in this chapter, God desires to be worshipped, not only in private, but especially by His gathered people (Psalm 95:1-2). God sends His disciples to the nations of the world so that the number of those who worship Him may grow, not stagnate or diminish (Matthew 28:18-20). All the people of the earth owe God praises and worship for who He is and what He has done for us. That has not changed and will never change.

Every one of us has to take a stand about this call to the universal worship of God. Will we be among

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⁴Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 184.

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those who are equivocating and resisting the call, or will we humble ourselves and embrace God's invitation to give Him glory? Will we open our hearts to His matchless goodness, kindness, and gentleness and respond with our songs, praises, and prayers?

It is essential that every one of us makes worship attendance a priority. There will be days when a sermon will not be particularly moving, when singing and music will be disorganized and uninspiring, when prayers will feel like drudgery, but we still have to be in church for at least three reasons. *First*, we have to be in church because God expects our worship and infinitely deserves our worship, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable" (Psalm 145:3). *Second*, we have to be in church because that is where God promised to meet us, "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (Psalm 22:3, NRSV). *Third*, we have to be in church because every Sabbath there will surely be many in attendance who need us to sing the faith to them, for on that day there may be no song in their own hearts.

There are two further practical things we can implement to enhance our corporate worship. *First*, we should actively participate in worship services. When you enter the sanctuary, before you do anything else, earnestly pray that God will help you focus and be attentive during the service. And then, sing the songs thinking of what you are proclaiming, labor and intercede with God in corporate prayers, and listen carefully for the beckoning of God to you in sermon. *Second*, we should maintain a vibrant personal devotional life. The passion of our private

worship will inevitably affect our participation in corporate worship. When we delight ourselves in the LORD (Psalm 37:4) in private, we will not be able to contain ourselves from delighting in the LORD on Sabbath morning.

Reflect on your worship attitudes in light of the last section of this chapter. Do you feel that your attitude to worship attendance needs to change? If so, in what ways?

Are you convinced that God deserves your worship and your praises? If you are not, pray for this conviction.

In what ways can you contribute to Sligo corporate worship services to ensure that they honor God and are pleasing to Him?

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